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FOOTBALL

Sadd aim for AFC Champions League glory after QSL triumph

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd SC will be on a mission to end a long wait in the AFC Champions League Elite Finals. The Qatari side will face Japan's Kawasaki Frontale in what promises to be a titanic quarter-final at the Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Stadium tomorrow.

Al Sadd will be brimming with confidence after sealing the Qatar Stars League title, emerging champions for the 18th time and then reaching the Qatar Cup final.

The league title was a remarkable achievement as they had to come from behind to upstage Al Duhail, who had led the title race for the major part of the season but had to concede to Al Sadd's supe-

riority, with Felix Sanchez's side defeating Al Ahli 5-0 to end the season two points in front.

They will hope for a similar outcome on the continental stage, having advanced to the quarter-finals for the first time since 2019. Al Sadd, however, will feel they will be challenging for the title after easily advancing past the group stage.

They impressed in the Round of 16 as well, defeating UAE's Al Wasl 4-2 on aggregate to set up the showdown with Frontale. Akram Afif will be their focal point, with the mercurial winger already on five goals in the AFC Champions League Elite and having found the back of the net 18 times as Al Sadd won the Qatar Stars League title.

Al Sadd concluded its training in Doha on Thursday, as they reached Jeddah yesterday ahead of the clash against Frontale.



Al Sadd players arrived in Jeddah yesterday, ahead of their AFC Champions League Elite quarter-final match against Japan's Kawasaki Frontale.

COPA DEL REY

Real demand action against referees and boycott pre-Cup final activities

Real may refuse to play if referees for the final is not changed

AFP
Seville, Spain

Real Madrid said complaints made by Copa del Rey final referees against pressure from the club's television channel were 'unacceptable' yesterday, after pulling out of planned pre-match activities.

"These statements... made in a premeditated manner 24 hours before the final against one of the participants, demonstrate, once again, a clear and manifest animosity and hostility of these referees towards Real Madrid," said the Spanish champions on the eve of today's cup final in Seville. Real Madrid refused to take part in planned Copa del Rey final related activities yesterday because they were angry at comments made by the match officials earlier in the day, the club told media in Seville.

The referee for today's match against rivals Barcelona, Ricardo de Burgos Bengoetxea, welled up when speaking about pressure officials have faced from Real Madrid TV this season. Spanish champions Real Madrid boycotted the press conference, the open training in front of media, the traditional presidents' dinner and a pre-match photo-call.

"Real Madrid considers the public statements made by the Copa del Rey final referees unacceptable," said the club in their statement. Madrid took particular issue with the final's VAR referee Pablo Gonzalez Fuertes suggesting referees were "united" and looking to take collective action against the pressure they had received from Real Madrid TV.

"Even more surprising statements, in a threatening tone... to announce supposed measures or actions that are far removed from the principles of fairness, objectivity and impartiality that should prevail just hours before (the final)," continued Madrid's statement. "In view of the seriousness of what has happened, Real Madrid hopes that those in charge of the RFEF and the refereeing profession will act accordingly, adopting the relevant measures in defence of the prestige of the institutions they represent."

Spanish media report Madrid want the referees changed for the final and could even refuse to play if that does not happen. This week the club's television channel launched a new video attacking the referee for the final, something they have done to various officials this season.

"Real Madrid told the RFEF they will not take part in the press conference or the official training session looking forward to the (final)," said



Grounds crew mow the grass after Real Madrid failed to attend a training session at La Cartuja stadium in Seville yesterday, on the eve of their Copa del Rey final against Barcelona (AFP)



Barcelona's Spanish forward Lamine Yamal controls the ball during a training session in Seville yesterday. (AFP)

the Spanish football federation. Los Blancos also published an open letter in February claiming Spanish refereeing was "rigged" and "completely discredited".

Real Madrid have form when it comes to boycotts: in October they stayed away from the Ballon d'Or ceremony because their winger Vinicius Junior was not named the best player in the world. "Real Madrid does not go where it

is not respected," the club said at the time.

De Burgos Bengoetxea had spoken about the effect criticism from Real Madrid's television channel was having on his family life. "When a child of yours goes to school and there are kids telling him that his father is a 'thief' and comes home crying, it's totally messed up," De Burgos Bengoetxea told a news conference.

"What I do is try to educate my son, to say that his father is honest, above all honest, who can make mistakes, like any sportsperson," he continued, becoming emotional. "This is really messed up... but the day I leave (the job), I want my son to be proud of what his father is, and what refereeing is, it has given us many values."

Wiping away tears, the 39-year-old called for deeper thought on the issue of referee abuse. "It's not right what we are going through, many colleagues, and not just in professional football, but also at grassroots level," he added.

"Everyone should reflect about where we want to go, about what we want from sport and from football."

Gonzalez Fuertes had suggested officials could take further action over Real Madrid TV's broadcasts in the coming weeks. "Have no doubt that we are going to have to start taking much more serious measures than we are taking," said Gonzalez Fuertes.

"We will not continue to allow what is happening. Soon, you will hear from us. We are going to make history, because we are not going to continue to bear what we are putting up with."

SPOTLIGHT

Al Hilal hit seven past Gwangju to cruise into semis

AFP
Riyadh

Four-time winners Al Hilal booked their place in the AFC Champions League Elite semi-finals last night with a thumping 7-0 win against South Korea's Gwangju in Jeddah.

The Saudi Arabian champions, who began the campaign with Brazil superstar Neymar in their ranks before his February return to Santos, romped to victory at King Abdullah Sports City, with 2022 Asian Footballer of the Year Salem al-Dawsari the standout.

The quarter-final encounter kicked off the inaugural AFC Champions League Elite Finals, where the continent's top eight teams - four from West Asia, four from the East - compete in a centralised location for the trophy. Al Hilal are one of three Saudi sides in the last eight, alongside Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr and Al Ahli, the home team who boast the likes of Riyadh Mahrez and Ivan Toney.

Al Hilal underlined their credentials by cruising into the last four. They needed all of six minutes to take the lead, when former Lazio midfielder Sergej Milinkovic-Savic met al-Dawsari's corner to power home a header. Al Hilal doubled their advantage on 25 minutes, Brazilian winger Malcom cutting the ball back for compatriot Marcos Leonardo.

The summer signing from Benfica swept his finish past Kim Kyeong-Min in the Gwangju goal.

Eight minutes later, Leonardo sent al-Dawsari through on goal,

leaving the Saudi Arabia captain to race clear and slide a low shot into the net.

Al-Dawsari moved to nine goals, making him the joint-top scorer in this season's tournament, alongside Gwangju's Albanian winger Jasir Asani. The only drawback for Al Hilal was that Joao Cancelo, a treble-winner with Manchester City, was forced to leave the pitch shortly before half-time with what appeared to be a hamstring injury.

Al Hilal maintained their dominance after the break, with Aleksander Mitrovic adding a fourth in the 55th minute. The ex-Newcastle United and Fulham striker, who has missed a large portion of this season through injury, met fellow Serbian international Milinkovic-Savic's cross to side-foot home.

With 12 minutes remaining, Malcom exchanged passes with Mitrovic to slot past Kim for 5-0. Substitute Nasser al-Dawsari made it six with a deflected effort from the edge of the penalty area. Abdullah al-Hamdan then rifled home from range following Mitrovic's set-up.

In next Tuesday's semi-final Al Hilal will meet either fellow Saudi club Al Ahli or Thailand's Buriram United. Those teams face off today, also at King Abdullah Sports City.

Meanwhile, Ronaldo resumes his quest for continental glory today, when Al Nassr take on last year's runners-up Yokohama F-Marinots at Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City. The Japanese side sacked ex-England assistant manager Steve Holland last week, with Australian Patrick Kisnorbo installed as interim head coach.



In next Tuesday's semi-final Al Hilal will meet either fellow Saudi club Al Ahli or Thailand's Buriram United.

MOTOGP

Alex sets course to top Jerez practice times

AFP
Jerez de la Frontera, Spain

Alex Marquez climbed back on his bike yesterday to set a Jerez course record in a flag and fall filled final practice session for the Grand Prix of Spain.

The younger Marquez brother set a time of 1min 35.991sec on a Ducati Gresini, 0.103sec ahead of Italy's Francesco Bagnaia on a factory Ducati and 0.036 inside the course record the Italian set last year.

Italian Franco Morbidelli was third on a VR46 Ducati. Championship leader Marc Marquez was fourth on a factory Ducati.

Frenchman Fabio Quartararo, displaying the rediscovered competitiveness of his Yamaha, was fifth and the top non-Ducati.

The session had been halted after nine minutes when Alex Marquez slid out as high speed on turn five.

His bike rocketed across the gravel and through an air fence, forcing stewards to wave red flags while the barrier was repaired.

After picking himself up, Marquez was ferried back on a scooter nursing his right hand.

Alex Marquez had also crashed in the morning session but still set the fastest time.

He repeated the trick in the afternoon.

He returned for the final minutes of the session and quickly jumped to third before catapulting to a new record, as stewards repeatedly waved yellow warning flags.

Quartararo, Jack Miller, Ai Ogura, Raul Fernandez and Joan Mir, were among riders who crashed during the session.

Fermin Aldeguer, on the second Gresini bike, Johann Zarco on a Honda, KTM's Pedro Acosta, Fabio Di Giannantonio on a VR46 and Joan Mir on a Honda completed the top 10 who advance directly to the 12-rider final qualifying session today.

That will determine the first four rows of the grid for the evening's 12-lap sprint and tomorrow's 25-lap main race.

The other 13 riders must ride in an earlier session with two places in Q2 at stake.

Marc Marquez, the six-time world champion, has dominated so far this season, taking all four poles, all four sprints and only missing out on a sweep when he fell while leading the Grand Prix of the Americas in Texas last month.

He appeared to complete the afternoon session on one set of tyres, conserving his options for later in the weekend.

Marquez, who leads the standings by 17 points ahead of younger brother Alex, is a three-time winner in Jerez - in 2014, 2018 and 2019, but Bagnaia has triumphed in each of the last three years.

Bagnaia won in the US after Marquez's error, but the Italian is already 26 points off the pace in third overall.



Gresini Racing's Alex Marquez (left) and Prima Pramac Racing's Jack Miller in action during a practice session for the MotoGP Spanish Grand Prix at the Jerez racetrack yesterday. (AFP)

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Patel and Mendis help Sunrisers beat Chennai

Victory lifts Cummins' men to eighth, while Chennai are bottom

AFP
Chennai

Fast bowler Harshal Patel grabbed four wickets and Kamindu Mendis showed his allround skill as Sunrisers Hyderabad upstaged Chennai Super Kings by five wickets in Chennai yesterday.

Patel grabbed 4-28 and was ably assisted by skipper Pat Cummins and Jaydev Unadkat - both finishing with identical figures of 2-21 - to dismiss the home team for a below-par 154 in 19.5 overs. South African youngster Dewald Brevis was the top scorer for the Kings with a blistering 25-ball 42, cracking four sixes and a boundary on his debut for the franchise.

Skipper MS Dhoni failed to make his 400th T20 a memorable occasion, managing just six runs and coming out on the losing side.

Sunrisers achieved the target in 18.4 overs for the loss of five wickets with Ishan Kishan leading the way with a solid 34-ball 44 with five boundaries and a six. Mendis struck an unbeaten 32 off 22 balls, adding 49 in an unbroken sixth wicket stand with Nitish Kumar Reddy who finished with a 13-ball 19 not out.

The victory lifted Sunrisers to eighth on the 10-team table topped by Gujarat Titans with 12 points in eight matches while five-time champions Kings are at the bottom with four points in nine. Patel, declared man-of-the-match, attributed discipline as the key for his fine bowling. "I figured out pretty early that hitting it on a good length around the stumps was important because it was hard to hit with the horizontal bat," said Patel.

Dhoni blamed losing a cluster



Sunrisers Hyderabad's Kamindu Mendis (right) celebrates with captain Pat Cummins after taking the wicket of Chennai Super Kings' Ravindra Jadeja in Chennai yesterday. (Reuters)

ter of wickets for the poor batting show. "I think we kept losing wickets and another thing is in the first innings the wicket was slightly better," said Dhoni. "A total of 157 wasn't a justifiable score. It wasn't turning a lot, a little two-paced but nothing out of the ordinary."

Earlier, Chennai Super Kings were rocked by Sunrisers' pacer

Patel who ripped through the middle and lower-order batting. The home team started on a wrong note when opener Shaik Rasheed was caught in the slip off the very first delivery of the match by fast bowler Mohammad Shami.

Seventeen-year-old Ayush Mhatre was impressive in his 19-ball 30, which was studded with six boundaries, while Ravindra

Jadeja managed 21 with a six and a boundary. Jadeja's dismissal brought Dhoni to the crease as the crowd roared to welcome their hero in his 400th T20 match but Dhoni's stay lasted for just ten balls. It was Brevis who assured Kings get past 150 with some lusty hitting. Deepak Hooda also chipped in with a 21-ball 22 with a six and a boundary.

CYCLING

Record 18 teams to race in Tour of Britain Women

Reuters
London

World champions and hometown heroes will battle for glory as an unprecedented 18 teams prepare to tackle the Tour of Britain Women this June, marking the biggest field in the event's history.

The 108-rider peloton features 12 UCI Women's World-Tour teams, including world number one squad Team SD Worx - Protine with last year's winner Lotte Kopecky, British champion Pfeiffer Georgi's Team Picnic PostNL, and Lidl-Trek featuring home favourite Anna Henderson.

Starting in North Yorkshire's Dalby Forest on June 5, the race will showcase 13 of the world's top 15-ranked teams alongside all five British UCI Continental outfits, bringing elite cycling to communities across northern England and Scotland.

"This incredible line-up shows the huge support the race has from UCI teams outside the UK," said Jonathan Day, Managing Director of British Cycling Events. "The appeal of racing in Britain in front of our amazing crowds is clear."

Last year's stage winner Ruby Roseman-Gannon (Liv AlUla Jayco) called it "one of my favourite races," while Isle of Man's Lizzie Holden (UAE Team ADQ) praised

the "notoriously hard" British conditions that create "aggressive and exciting racing."

For Scottish-based Handslings Alba, the race offers rare home advantage. "It's the only World-Tour race on our calendar on home soil," said Team Manager Bob Lyons.

The race concludes in Glasgow on June 8 after stages through the North York Moors and the Scottish Borders.

Vingegaard turns attention to Tour de France

Two-time champion Jonas Vingegaard said yesterday he has turned his focus to the Tour de France after recovering from a concussion sustained in a nasty

fall in March. Dane Vingegaard crashed on March 13 during Paris-Nice and is not expected to compete again until the Criterium du Dauphine, which runs from June 8-15.

Vingegaard won the Tour in 2022 and 2023 but finished second to Tadej Pogacar in the last edition.

This year's race takes place from July 5-27.

"The focus is now fully on the Tour de France," Vingegaard said in Visma-Lease a Bike statement. "I no longer have any issues from the concussion I sustained earlier, or any other physical problems."

"It's important to work on that and to leave nothing to chance."

SPOTLIGHT

Javelin star Chopra rules out Pakistan rival's presence at home meet



Reuters
Bengaluru

India's Olympic javelin gold medallist Neeraj Chopra said it was now "completely out of the question" that rival Arshad Nadeem of Pakistan will attend his meet in Bengaluru next month following Tuesday's deadly Islamist militant attack in Indian Kashmir.

Relations between nuclear-armed neighbours India and Pakistan have plummeted to their lowest level in years after the killing of 26 tourists on Wednesday.

A day before the attack, Chopra had announced that the world's top throwers, including Paris Olympics champion Nadeem, had been invited to the first Neeraj Chopra Classic on May 24, an event he hoped would pave the way for a Diamond League meet in India one day. However, the attack in Kashmir prompted heavy criticism of Chopra's decision to invite Nadeem, even though it was unlikely the Pakistan thrower was going to attend.

"There has been so much talk

about my decision to invite Arshad Nadeem to compete in the Neeraj Chopra Classic, and most of it has been hate and abuse," Chopra, who won gold in Tokyo and silver in Paris, said in a social media post yesterday. "The invitation I extended to Arshad was from one athlete to another - nothing more, nothing less. The aim of the NC Classic was to bring the best athletes to India and for our country to be the home of world-class sporting events."

"After all that has taken place over the last 48 hours, Arshad's presence at the NC Classic was completely out of the question."

Media reports said Nadeem, Pakistan's first individual Olympic gold medallist, had opted not to attend the Bengaluru meet, which clashed with his training schedule for the Asian Championships in South Korea next month.

The soured relations between the two countries also spilled over to the sports world earlier this year when India's cricket team refused to travel to Pakistan for the Champions Trophy and played all their matches, including the March 9 final, in Dubai.

'Curtain could come down on Crucible Theatre hosting world championship'

London: Sheffield's Crucible Theatre is to snooker what Wimbledon is for tennis but its days of hosting the world championship could be numbered according to Matchroom Sport president Barry Hearn. Since first hosting the tournament in 1977, the venue has provided the backdrop to a golden age for snooker but Hearn says it is no longer fit for purpose. With the hosting contract expiring in two years, Matchroom, which has largely controlled snooker since 2010, is heavily involved in negotiations and Hearn says ideally the World Snooker Tour wants to stay. But the 76-year-old, whose son Eddie is Matchroom chairman, has called on Sheffield city council to expand the venue from its 980-capacity or face losing the event. "It's black and white: we love the Crucible, we love Sheffield, but the Crucible and Sheffield have got to love us," Hearn, former chairman of the World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association (WPBSA) told BBC 5 Live. "We want to stay but the financials have to be taken into consideration. The facilities where the Crucible is are no longer fit for purpose, that's the key issue."

Hearn's Matchroom Sport also runs darts which draws crowds of several thousands to large arenas and subsequently can offer huge prize money and he believes snooker must go the same way. "The Crucible's been a big part of my life and a big part of snooker's life," Hearn said. "But it has to move with the times and someone, whether it's government or Sheffield, have to come up with a way of showing us that they're going to treat us with respect and give us the type of facilities we require. It's as simple as that. It's not complicated." The Crucible's cosy intimacy is loved by fans and TV audiences alike, but the capacity cannot match demand. A record six Chinese players have reached the last 16 of this year's ongoing championship and China, along with Saudi Arabia, have both been linked with hosting the tournament. "Maybe we should take this worldwide. Maybe it should be one year in Beijing, one year in Saudi and one year in Sheffield. We have to move with the times," Hearn said. "I'm concerned with increasing the prize money as we have done with darts. Snooker needs to be more commercially viable."

TENNIS

Sabalenka makes winning start at the Madrid Open

‘Every time I go there, it’s like a challenge for me, even though I love playing on clay and I feel really good’



Belarus’ Aryna Sabalenka returns a ball to Russia’s Anna Blinkova during their 2025 WTA Tour Madrid Open second round singles match at the Caja Magica in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Madrid

Aryna Sabalenka kicked off her quest for a third Madrid Open title with a 6-3, 6-4 victory over Anna Blinkova in second-round action at the Caja Magica yesterday.

The world number one improved her record at the tournament to 18-4, having lifted the trophy in 2021 and 2023, alongside her runner-up showing to Iga Swiatek last year.

After racing to a double-break 5-0 advantage against Blinkova in the opening set, Sabalenka lost one of her breaks before taking the lead on her third set point on the 48-minute mark.

The second set was a straight-

forward affair, with an early break of serve enough for Sabalenka to punch her ticket to the third round, where she awaits either her former doubles partner Elise Mertens or Colombia’s Camila Osorio.

Sabalenka’s three Grand Slam titles have all come on hard courts, but the Belarusian power-hitter has shown she can contend on clay, with two trophies clinched from nine finals reached on the surface.

The 26-year-old admits the French Open has proven to be a “challenge” for her and she feels she has unfinished business there after losing in the 2023 semi-finals to Karolina Muchova and the 2024 quarter-finals to Russian teenager Mirra Andreeva.

“Every time I go there, it’s like a challenge for me, even though I love playing on clay and I feel really

good,” said Sabalenka of Roland Garros.

“But I like to accept tough challenges. So I really hope that one year I’ll be able to get that beautiful trophy in my collection.”

Earlier in the day, world number nine Paula Badosa delivered another blow to the tournament as she was forced to withdraw from her home event due to a lower back injury.

Badosa joins her fellow Spaniard Carlos Alcaraz, who pulled out of the Madrid Open on Thursday citing a left hamstring issue and a right adductor injury.

Meanwhile, Tunisian 2022 Madrid champion Ons Jabeur crashed out in her opener to Moyuka Uchijima 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 while Greece’s Maria Sakkari took a positive step towards recapturing her form by



Germany’s Alexander Zverev returns the ball to Spain’s Roberto Bautista during their 2025 ATP Tour Madrid Open first round singles match yesterday. Zverev won 6-2, 6-2. (AFP)

dismissing 29th-seeded Magda Linette 7-6(5), 6-3.

Zverev basks on favourite court

On the men’s side, last week’s Munich champion Alexander Zverev fired 32 winners against just 24 unforced errors in a dominant 6-2, 6-2 win over Spain’s Roberto Bautista Agut.

“For me, I always say that this is my favourite centre court in the entire world,” said Zverev, who is a two-time Madrid champion.

“I only lost twice in my entire life here, so I hope that stays that way, throughout the next 10 days, and I can continue playing good tennis. As long as I do that, I’m happy.”

The top-seeded Zverev awaits Nuno Borges or Alejandro Davidovich Fokina in the third round.

Last year’s finalist Felix Auger-

Aliassime stumbled at the first hurdle, losing to Argentina’s Juan Manuel Cerundolo 7-6(5), 6-4.

The Canadian former world number six had a good start to 2025, winning two titles and reaching the final in Dubai but is currently on a four-match losing streak.

Auger-Aliassime is projected to drop out of the top 25 when the new rankings are released after the tournament.

It was a good day for Argentines overall as Cerundolo’s brother, Francisco, also advanced to the third round with a 6-3, 6-4 result against qualifier Harold Mayot.

Francisco Cerundolo will next take on his compatriot Francisco Comesana, who rallied back from 1-5 down in the opening set to upset 13th-seeded Arthur Fils

7-6(4), 6-4. Fils criticised the live electronic line calling that is being used at clay tournaments for the first time this season, noting how the marks on the court do not match the ones shown on screens in the video replays.

Comesana agrees with Fils regarding the inaccuracy of the technology, but says he still prefers live electronic line calling to having line judges and chair umpires make the call.

“I looked at the marks as well and some marks were like 1cm out. But it’s for both of us,” said the 70th-ranked Comesana, who is through to a Masters 1000 third round for the first time.

“I prefer the electronic line calling because sometimes the line judges are late in making the calls,” Comesana said.

GOLF

Friends and foes: Salinda and Velo shoot record 58 at the Zurich Classic

Reuters
Avondale, Louisiana

Isaiah Salinda and Kevin Velo set the four-ball record at the Zurich Classic of New Orleans with a 14-under-par 58 to take the first-round lead on Thursday at TPC Louisiana in Avondale, Louisiana.

Playing the best-ball format, Salinda and Velo were a white-hot 12 under through their first 11 holes - an eagle by Salinda at the par-5 seventh and the rest birdies - before slowing down. The team finished with five pars and two birdies over the final seven holes.

The scoring record only handed Salinda and Velo a one-shot lead over Danish twins Nicolai and Rasmus Hojgaard, who turned in a 13-under 59.

Salinda is No 163 in the Official World Golf Ranking, Velo is No 363, and both rookies have yet to win on the PGA Tour.

“I honestly think it’s more important to play with someone you like and someone you enjoy playing with, one of your friends,” Salinda said. “It’s really cool. We only get to play this format really once a year, and we’ve known each other since we were young junior golfers. We’ve stayed incredibly close friends since, and we’ve been looking forward to this event for a while.”

Salinda stuck his second shot at No 7 to 5 feet for an easy eagle. That followed birdie putts at Nos 4, 5 and 6 from Salinda, the latter from 15 1/2 feet away.

“It was out-of-body to watch him make as many putts as he did for sure,” Velo said. “We had some very good momentum birdies. I feel like our birdie on 3, his birdie on 6, birdie on 9, the eagle on 7, there were these key shots and



Kevin Velo (left) and Isaiah Salinda celebrate making a 58, a new course record, on the 18th hole during the first round of the Zurich Classic of New Orleans golf tournament. (Reuters)

key putts that were made that really made a huge difference.”

The Hojgaard brothers were machine-like on Thursday, as neither made a single bogey. They started on the back nine, and after a run of four pars at Nos 12-15, they birdied every remaining hole except the par-3 third.

Rasmus Hojgaard finished it off with a birdie putt at the par-3 ninth from 11 feet.

“I think last year we both had high expectations about going out and making a ton of birdies and we didn’t do that last year, so it was a bit of a wrong mindset to go into it,” he said.

“Now today we didn’t think too much about getting to a cer-

tain score or anything. It was more about creating a good vibe and create chances out there, and then we both rolled the putter well.”

The tournament will turn to foursomes (alternate shot) on the second day. Following the 36-hole cut, it will be four-ball on Saturday and foursomes on Sunday.

Collin Morikawa and Kurt Kitayama are tied for third at 11-under 61 along with the teams of Australian Cam Davis and Canadian Adam Svensson; Paul Peterson and Germany’s Thomas Rosenmueller; and Norwegian Kris Ventura and Frenchman Antoine Rozner.

Defending champions Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland and Shane Lowry of Ireland opened with an 8-under 64.

This is McIlroy’s first tournament since winning the Masters and completing the career Grand Slam.

“Shane got off to a really good start. I didn’t do anything,” McIlroy said. “Shane joked I could have got a couple extra hours in bed if I wanted to. ... We felt like we left a few shots out there, but we were just saying the two foursomes days on Friday and Sunday here are the important days in this tournament, and it’s important for us to obviously post a good score tomorrow.”

MOTORSPORT

McLaren says it will exit Formula E at end of 2025

Reuters
London

McLaren will exit the all-electric Formula E championship at the end of the 2024-25 season to focus on Formula One, IndyCar and a new hypercar project from 2027 in the World Endurance Championship.

McLaren, the reigning Formula One constructors’ world champions, said in a statement yesterday that the decision after three seasons in Formula E followed a strategic review of activities.

“The time is right to explore other opportunities that more closely align with McLaren Racing’s overall strategic direction - including our 2027 entry into the FIA World Endurance Championship,” said McLaren CEO Zak Brown.

“For now, we are focused on setting this great team up for future success by working towards se-

curing a new owner.” A Formula E spokesperson said there remained the possibility of McLaren continuing through to the end of the series’ current Gen3 era in 2026.

McLaren are aiming for the so-called ‘Triple Crown’ of winning the Monaco F1 Grand Prix, Le Mans 24 Hours race and Indianapolis 500.

Formula E, a 10-year-old series that started out with city-based races and also has a round in Monaco, lacks a true standout event.

Jeff Dods, chief executive of the Liberty Global-owned electric series, said brands came and went and while losing McLaren was a blow there was an opportunity for another manufacturer to get involved. “I can’t sugar-coat it, it’s bad news,” he told reporters on a video call. “We can’t deny McLaren’s a power brand in racing and therefore we would prefer they continued in the championship. But we have currently six manufacturers in the championship, and five of those have already signed up and committed to Gen4.

MADRID F1 CIRCUIT CAN BE THE WORLD’S BEST, SAYS SAINZ

Madrid: Madrid’s Madring Formula One circuit can host the best race on the calendar when it debuts next season, according to home driver Carlos Sainz.

The Spaniard told reporters yesterday that the 5.47km layout, with 22 turns, will have its own hybrid character with tight street sections and a more open area with high-speed corners.

“I think we can be the best circuit in the world and the best event of the whole calendar,” said the Madrid-born Williams driver, who took part in a press conference as an event ambassador.

“There will be 24 or 25 races, and I honestly think along with Mexico, Miami, Las Vegas that do it very well but sincerely I trust a lot in Madrid and I believe that Madrid can do better.”

Local authorities said licences

and paperwork were ready from yesterday for building work to begin. Spanish engineering firm Acciona and France’s Eiffage have won the contract to construct the circuit in an urban area in Madrid’s northeast, around the IFEMA exhibition centre.

It is expected to be completed by May 2026 and cost €83.2m (\$94.57m), Acciona said.

The Madrid circuit will eventually replace Barcelona’s Circuit de Catalunya, currently host of the Spanish Grand Prix, which is located some 32km from the eastern port city with a roughly 45-minute walk from the nearest station.

Spain is set for an overlap next season with Madrid and Barcelona, which will be in the last year of its contract, both expected to feature.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Liverpool have ‘big responsibility’ to win title at Anfield: Slot

‘We are aware that the last time this club won the league was during the Covid’

AFP

London

Arne Slot believes Liverpool have a “big responsibility” to clinch the Premier League title in front of their own fans when Tottenham visit Anfield tomorrow. Slot’s side will be crowned English champions for a record-equalling 20th time if they avoid defeat against struggling Tottenham.

Liverpool have five games left to seal the title and need just one point to do so, making it only a matter of time before they get their hands on the trophy.

The Reds’ last title five years ago was slightly anti-climactic as it came during the Covid-19 pandemic, meaning Anfield was empty when the trophy was presented due to lockdown restrictions.

And, with Liverpool travelling to Chelsea for their next league game after the Tottenham clash, Slot acknowledged there is extra pressure to seal the title on home turf. “It’s a big responsibility. We are aware that the last time this club won the league was during the Covid time. So everybody is looking forward to Sunday,” Slot told reporters.

“We know there’s still a job to do. We need at least one point. Our fans know as well. When they come to the stadium they have to support us in the best possible way as they have done all season. It’s a nice game to look forward to but also a responsibility we have for Sunday.”

Liverpool nearly secured the title on Wednesday when Arsenal were held to a 2-2 draw by Crystal Palace, who would have wrapped up the trophy for Slot’s men with a victory at the Emirates Stadium. Slot and



Arne Slot’s Liverpool will be crowned English champions for a record-equalling 20th time if they avoid defeat against struggling Tottenham Hotspur tomorrow.

his players gathered to watch the Arsenal game in the hope of celebrating together.

Instead, Liverpool sit 12 points clear of Arsenal, who have just four games left, meaning Slot and company are primed to revel in an even more raucous party against Tottenham. “It was different. Normally

when you watch a game of football, you are either alone or with family or friends. But we watched it all together,” Slot said. “Before the game, I would have been surprised if the game ended in a draw. But during the game, I wasn’t because Crystal Palace again showed what this league is all about.”

Equalling the record of 20 English titles set by bitter rivals Manchester United will add extra verve to Liverpool fans’ celebrations. In his first season since replacing the beloved Jurgen Klopp, former Feyenoord boss Slot will become the 12th manager to win the Premier League and the first Dutchman.

Asked if he has considered the historic connotations of Liverpool’s imminent triumph, Slot insisted he was focused only on Tottenham. “No, I get these questions so it comes to your mind but it is the last thing you think of as a manager at this time. We saw last week how hard it was to get a win against a team that was nearly relegated at Leicester,” he said. “I am not getting carried away. We have faced Tottenham three times and I know how hard it is to beat them.”

It is a mark of Slot’s impressive impact on a team that fell away in Klopp’s final season that Liverpool have been beaten just twice in the league this term. “This club has to win trophies,” Slot said of the pressure of managing Liverpool. “The good thing is most managers work here a long time so you have a few chances to win trophies. You are aware of that but that is not the first thing that you think about when you walk through this door.”

Some critics claim Liverpool have benefited from Manchester City’s steep decline and the injuries that damaged Arsenal’s challenge. But Slot said: “Everybody can have their own opinion. You might have a different opinion. That is the nice thing about the world we are living in. I am only here for a year so I can only tell you what I experienced. It has never been as hard to end up in the top four or five. In my opinion it is a really difficult league.”

BUNDESLIGA

Kane hopes to ‘silence’ the doubters as Bayern title looms

AFP

Berlin

After a career of individual awards but no team honours, Bayern Munich striker Harry Kane’s title breakthrough could come as early as full time of today’s home match against Mainz.

If they beat sixth-placed Mainz and second-placed Bayer Leverkusen fail to beat Augsburg at home, Bayern and Kane will be crowned Bundesliga winners. Bayern are eight points clear with four games remaining, so a first title for Kane is a mere formality.

But after losing six finals – three with Tottenham, two with England and one with Bayern – a debut title win would be a long-awaited reward for the 31-year-old forward.

After two decades at boyhood club Tottenham, Kane moved to Bayern in 2023, motivated by a desire for team honours. While Bayern’s dreams of winning the Champions League in their own stadium this season flamed out with a quarter-final loss to Inter Milan, lifting the Bundesliga shield would

soothe frustrations after a trophyless 2023-24.

Kane has rarely spoken about the title, preferring to focus on the task at hand, but in February he revealed how much the pursuit of a team honour drove him. “There are many people who, throughout my career, only talk about the fact I haven’t won a title yet. It would be nice to silence a few of them,” Kane said.

Kane would also join Kevin Keegan and Owen Hargreaves as Englishmen who won the Bundesliga. Speaking on Wednesday, Bayern powerbroker Uli Hoeness said a key player behind the 100mn euro decision to bring Kane to Bavaria – said “nobody deserves the title more” than the England captain.

Calling Kane “a real Bayern player”, Hoeness lavished praise on the striker, saying “he fights, he works, he scores an incredible number of goals, but he also works hard for the team. “You can feel that he absolutely wants to win this title.”

Today, Eintracht Frankfurt can take a step in qualifying for the Champions League through a top-four finish for the first time, when they host RB Leipzig. Frankfurt, whose only other participa-

tion in the modern Champions League came through winning the Europa League, sit three points clear of fourth-placed Leipzig.

Leipzig could fall as low as sixth with a loss, while seventh-placed Borussia Dortmund – who have taken 10 of a possible 12 points in their past four matches – are also within striking distance. RB Leipzig’s trip to third-placed Eintracht Frankfurt on Saturday will be crucial in the Champions League race.

Leipzig have only missed the Champions League once since their promotion in 2016 and being absent from the top European stage would be a major setback as new Red Bull boss Jurgen Klopp oversees his first off-season with the club.

Leipzig striker Yussuf Poulsen said Klopp had already been to the club “several” times and had made a mark with his “experience, passion and knowledge. His entire career demonstrates what he is capable of.”

Poulsen joined when Leipzig were in the third division in 2013, before two successive promotions, back-to-back German Cups and a Champions League semi-final.



After losing six finals – three with Tottenham, two with England and one with Bayern – a debut title win would be a long-awaited reward for Harry Kane.

PSG unbeaten record in Ligue 1 ends in defeat against Nice



Nice’s Morgan Sanson celebrates after scoring against Paris St Germain. (Reuters)

Paris: Paris St Germain’s hopes of becoming the first side to complete a Ligue 1 season unbeaten came crashing down at the Parc des Princes yesterday when Nice handed them their first defeat of the league campaign, winning 3-1 to boost their own Champions League ambitions.

Having already secured the title earlier this month, PSG still top the Ligue 1 standings on 78 points, while Nice move up to fourth on 54. The home side dominated the opening half-hour and created chance after chance but it was the visitors who took the lead through Morgan Sanson as he marked his first start of the season by applying a clinical first-time finish to Badredine Bouanani’s through-ball in the 35th minute.

The lead lasted just six minutes as Fabian Ruiz scored with a sumptuous half-volley to level but any thoughts the PSG fans might have had of their side going on to dominate were extinguished 22 seconds into the second half when Sanson scored his second, volleying the ball into the net from close range. Having scored from their only two shots on target up to that point, the visitors went 3-1 up when Youssef Ndayishimiye headed home a free kick in the 70th minute.

PSG, who face Premier League side Arsenal away in the first leg of their Champions League semi-final on Tuesday, enjoyed 75% of possession and managed to create twice as many goal-scoring opportunities but they were left frustrated by their own wayward finishing and some inspired goal-keeping from Marcin Bulka.

With the clock ticking past 90 minutes and seven minutes added on for stoppages, Bulka pulled off a superb reflex save to deny Goncalo Ramos and he followed that up with another top-drawer stop of Vitinha’s shot from the edge of the box, celebrating each save loudly.

The Parisians continued to pour forward but Nice defended doggedly and held on to give their hopes of qualifying for next season’s Champions League a considerable lift.

RESULT

Paris Saint-Germain 1 (Ruiz 41) Nice 3 (Sanson 35, 46, Ndayishimiye 70)

Playing today (times GMT)

Strasbourg v Saint-Etienne (1500), Le Havre v Monaco (1700), Lyon v Rennes (1905)

Tomorrow: Angers v Lille (1300), Lens v Auxerre, Nantes v Toulouse, Montpellier v Reims (all 1515), Marseille v Brest (1845)

SHOWJUMPING

Al-Khater, al-Mahmoud shine at Al Shaqab International League

The third round of the Al Shaqab International League, a qualifier for the FEI Group 7 Championship, continued at the Longines Indoor Arena with strong performances across categories.

In the Future Champions class (105cm), Khaled Nasser al-Khater topped the podium on Bakarat D’Azur in 32.44 seconds, followed by Youssef Abdulrahman al-Muftah on Croat Van Orkids and Fawaz al-Hokair on Cole Cassina.

In the Al Shaqab Champion Knights Tour (135cm), Ibrahim Yousef al-Mahmoud took first spot on Cattleea Plassyay (63.14s), followed by Mohammed Salem al-Marri and Saad Ahmed al-Saad.

Suhaim Hamad al-Yafei won the Junior Champions event (115cm) on Jamen Ray (33.62s), ahead of Ibrahim Khaled al-Kuwari and Ahmed Ali al-Jaber. Mohammed Hassan al-Hadi claimed first in the Open Round (115cm) with a rapid 24.81 seconds time on Capon, while Fahad bin Jassim bin Hamad al-Thani and Saad al-Qahtani rounded out the top three.

In the Youth Champions category (125cm), Issa Omran al-Owais led the field on Miss Cooper, with Yaqoub Nasser al-Mas and Saif Mohammed al-Nuaimi close behind.



In the Al Shaqab Champion Knights Tour (135cm), Ibrahim Yousef al-Mahmoud took first spot on Cattleea Plassyay.



In the Future Champions class 105cm (FEI Group VII Qualifier), Khaled Nasser al-Khater topped the podium, followed by Youssef Abdulrahman al-Muftah and Fawaz al-Hokair.



In the Youth Champions category (125cm), Issa Omran al-Owais led the field on Miss Cooper.